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SHORTGRASS COUNTRY by Monte Noelke

On Mother's Day and Easter Sunday, Mother has me escort her to church in Mertzon. The congregation is familiar. Families reaching far back into the town's history blend with scatterings of folks ranging from gas plant employees to local merchants and, of course, such prominent figures as we tenders of hollow horns and woolies.

About the same number of pews are filled from one year to the next. However, accurate census is impossible, as the young mothers are constantly jumping up to run back and check on disruptions occurring in the nursery. So what looks like a crowd of 80 citizens might be off 40 percent in any direction.

Since last year the church hired a lady minister for the first time. The timing was excellent, as Texans had just elected a Mrs. Richards governor of our state. I didn't dare open my mouth on the subject. My orders are to not say silly things and to dress in starched and pressed clothes.

I am allowed to write up my own alibis for the fateful exit at the end of the service. Excuses like, "Well, I travel a lot and see many, many of your faith's missionaries spreading the Word," or, "To be honest, reverend, living the life of a nomad is part of the drudgery, and there are many

sacrifices to be faced. I have to worship wherever those lonesome trails lead."

Polished and practiced, these lines worked on the men; but as Easter drew near, the realization came that ladies were much better jurors than men. Where those lines had stunned old Brother So-and-So, they had better be dumped if it came to the new presence, a lady of the cloth.

But the confrontation was never to occur. At the appointed time to pass the collection plate in the service, one of the deacons preparing to march down the aisle leaned over close to my left ear, and said, "In case you've forgotten, Monte, this is the part to get out your money."

Stunned is a gross understatement; shocked is too weak a word. Disbelieving, stunned and dismayed combined are close as I can come to describing my feelings. After tossing \$2 in the pot to cover my position, I excused myself and waited for Mother outside in the car.

Big stuff that was to pull off on a guy who only absorbs the heat, or the air conditioning twice a year. High and mighty, I say, of a deacon who howls about the checkoffs to support the beef and wool industries like it was snatching the bread from his supper table. Grand charity to the weak and the wandering in a temple created to make all men feel at home whenever their fate sentences them.

Between now and Mother's Day, I am going to make a call at the parsonage and discreetly warn the minister what is happening away from her earshot. Then we'll just see who has the job of passing the plate on the next holiday.